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COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

Seventeenth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 340th MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Thursday, 10 July 1997, at 10.30 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. KHAN

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The meeting was called to order at 10.55 a.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES UNDER ARTICLE 18 OF THE CONVENTION (continued)

Combined initial, second and third periodic reports of Antigua and Barbuda (CEDAW/C/ANT/1-3 and supplement to the initial, second and third periodic reports

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, Ms. Roseau (Antigua and Barbuda) took a place at the Committee table.

2. Ms. ROSEAU (Antigua and Barbuda), before introducing the combined initial, second and third periodic reports of Antigua and Barbuda and the supplement to the initial, second and third reports, offered apologies on behalf of her Government to a fellow State party for inexcusable remarks which had been included in the original submission in reference to article 6, and which should be expunged from the original report.

3. As part of the national machinery for the advancement of women, the Women's Desk had been established in 1981, the year of Antigua and Barbuda's independence. In 1985, it had been upgraded to become the Directorate of Women's Affairs with responsibility for promoting the social, political and economic interests of women and their role in development. The work of the Directorate was guided by the Beijing Platform for Action; its priorities were eliminating violence against women, education and training, eradicating poverty, encouraging more participation by women in the decision-making process, and expansion of health and reproductive health programmes targeted at young women. The Directorate also had plans for the mainstreaming of gender into the development process, and would soon implement a Gender Management System. On its initiative as well, the Government had introduced legal reforms including the Sexual Offences Act of 1995 and the submission of the Domestic Violence Bill.

Articles 1, 2 and 3

4. The Constitution provided protection from discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, origin, political opinion or affiliation, colour and creed, thus effectively giving individuals the right to bring violations before the courts. The Government also intended to introduce an Equal Opportunity Act to implement that constitutional provision. A recent act had provided maternity leave for women in the public sector, although no specific provision in that area existed for the private sector.

Article 5

5. Social and cultural patterns still resulted in the perception that women were limited to a reproductive role, contributing to their relative absence in political leadership. Efforts had been made to reduce sex stereotyping in the educational system, but little progress had been achieved thus far. For

example, few men had become involved in the teaching of family life education courses at the secondary school level, since that was viewed as a woman's responsibility.

6. Violence against women in the form of harassment, abuse, battery and rape, had become a priority issue for Antigua and Barbuda. Very little reporting of domestic violence had taken place until recently, as it was considered "normal" for men to use that strategy to keep women "in line". The Directorate of Women's Affairs was working to sensitize everyone involved in the health, law enforcement and counselling sectors to the issue, and a 24-hour domestic violence hotline was scheduled to open in August 1997. To address the issue from a legislative standpoint, the Government had passed the Sexual Offences Act of 1995 updating existing laws, and would begin consideration of the Protection Against Domestic Violence Bill. The Minister of Culture had also issued a call for calypsonians to use their art form not to degrade women but to promote love and respect for women.

Article 6

7. In Antigua and Barbuda there was no known traffic in women, but the recent rise in the level of prostitution was a cause for concern. Concerted efforts were being made by the authorities to eliminate such activity.

Article 7

8. At the general election in 1994, women had constituted the majority of voters, but despite that majority, no female had ever been elected to the legislature. The Government was committed to correcting the inequalities in power-sharing and at the highest policy-making levels. Nevertheless, women had been appointed to the positions of President of the Senate and Speaker of the House. Strategies had been initiated to achieve the goal of electing at least one woman candidate at the next general election. The Government had worked closely with the mass media to ensure full coverage of women's issues.

Article 8

9. There was no legal impediment or restriction on women representing Antigua and Barbuda at the international level and participating in the work of international organizations.

Article 9

10. With regard to nationality and citizenship, some legal obstacles still remained to the legal authority of a mother and concerning petitions for divorce, which the Government planned to address in the near future.

Article 10

11. The current system provided compulsory education for all children between the ages of 5 and 16. Scholarship grants for higher education were equally available to male and female applicants. In addition, opportunities existed for

girls and women who had left school or interrupted their studies to continue their education.

Article 12

12. It was the policy of Antigua and Barbuda to provide health care to all its citizens, and the Medical Benefits Scheme subsidized care and medicines for various categories of illness. The health care services provided maternal and child care, including family planning advice, breastfeeding, nutrition education, and pre- and post-natal care. Life expectancy for women had recently increased to 73 years, perhaps owing partly to the ongoing preventive health care measures being promoted through a multisectoral approach.

13. In the light of the growing incidence of HIV/AIDS, the Government had begun a national AIDS programme at the Ministry of Health. Its two main objectives were to prevent HIV transmission and to reduce the impact of HIV on the individual and the family. The programme worked closely with the Planned Parenthood Association and the education unit of the Ministry of Health to disseminate information and provide education through the use of drama, radio and other media.

14. The Government had demonstrated a firm commitment to primary health care, and had taken "health for all by the year 2000" as its mission statement. The New Health Guide 1997 was a compilation of plans and programmes with impact on the national five-year plan for health care. Moreover, ground had recently been broken for the construction of a state-of-the-art hospital, which would include improved maternity and child health facilities.

15. Women in Antigua and Barbuda had equal access to Government benefits. Almost twice as many women as men were employed in the banking sector, although few served at decision-making levels. No differences between men and women existed with regard to access to bank credit or loans, once the banks' lending criteria had been satisfied. Women had been representing the country in international and regional sports meetings, and could fully participate in cultural and other activities of their choice.

16. There were no State-funded social benefit programmes specifically designed for women and families, although recent legislation had created broader opportunities for obtaining State assistance on a merit basis for vocational training and post-secondary education.

17. Women contributed considerably to agricultural development in Antigua and Barbuda, constituting 38 per cent of the country's farmers overall and 53 per cent of the full-time farmers. A network of health clinics was available in rural areas, as were primary and secondary education for children, and all areas were serviced by public utilities. Women farmers were participating in farming organizations, co-operatives and other organizations, and were receiving assistance from the Directorate of Women's Affairs. They also had the same rights to land ownership and access to credit as men. Despite their vital contribution to agricultural production, however, women continued to live and work under adverse conditions; traditions and social preconceptions regarding their roles continued to contribute to some forms of discrimination.

18. Women were accorded full rights as citizens and individuals under the Constitution and laws of Antigua and Barbuda, could vote and hold office, and enjoyed the same status, rights and benefits as men with regard to employment. However, there was a need to strengthen the Labour Code to ensure fair and equal treatment for women in the labour market. Women had full access to the courts, and married women could hold and dispose of property and enter into contracts in their own names.

19. An anomaly in the marriage laws allowing persons to contract marriage while not yet having attained the age of majority remained to be addressed. Marriages could be solemnized by secular or clerical officials or by the Registrar General, and applicants were not subject to any restrictions or distinctions. While it was not uncommon for people to live as unmarried couples, they suffered disadvantages under the law in respect of property rights and division because the law did not recognize spousal equity in community property in such cases. Partners in both marriage and common-law relationships had a duty and responsibility to maintain the children, and married women had equal rights and responsibilities with men with regard to guardianship and custody of children. No female child could be discriminated against with regard to inheritance.

20. Divorce regulations had been considerably relaxed, providing for a single ground of "irretrievable breakdown" and reducing the waiting period from three years to one in cases of constructive desertion. Provision had also been made to allow husbands to be prosecuted for sexual assault if a separation order or agreement existed between the parties at the time of the offence. While there was no national family planning policy in Antigua and Barbuda, women had unhindered access to contraceptive information and items.

21. In conclusion, significant strides had been made in improving the status of women in Antigua and Barbuda. While aware that the achievement of that goal was a gradual process involving all sectors of society, the Government was strongly committed to working towards the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and to redressing inequities in power-sharing at the highest policy-making levels.

22. Ms. BERNARD said that the report had made clear that the status of women in Antigua and Barbuda was improving. She noted that Antigua and Barbuda resembled other countries in the region in that tourism was its main industry and provided the most employment opportunities for women. The country's laws were also developing in a direction similar to those of its neighbours, as illustrated by the domestic violence bill recently introduced in its legislature. She congratulated the Government of Antigua and Barbuda on having submitted its initial report and clarifications, and on having ratified the Convention without reservations.

23. Ms. SINEGEORGIS said that the additional materials and the presentation provided by the Government of Antigua and Barbuda had rectified omissions in the initial document, and she congratulated the Government on its efforts to implement fully the human rights of women and the provisions of the Convention.

24. Ms. JAVATE DE DIOS expressed appreciation for the concise and frank presentation of the Government's strong commitment to implementing the

provisions of the Convention and the Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women. She noted that the mandate and functions of the Directorate for Women's Affairs had been expanded since the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, and asked if the Directorate had access to sufficient personnel and financial resources. She also asked if the Directorate was an implementing agency, how it interacted with other Government ministries and planning and development units, how it promoted policies at the local level, and how it pursued contact with non-governmental organizations.

Article 2

25. Ms. HARTONO said that, as a developing country, Antigua and Barbuda had to cope with many problems, including limited human resources.

26. She asked how many chambers there were in the legislature; whether the judiciary had two or three and whether it was structured on the model of the United Kingdom; and whether there were also customary courts and, if so, whether there were differences in applicable law.

27. Ms. AOUIJ asked whether the Directorate of Women's Affairs had any quantitative targets, especially in the political and decision-making sphere, and also in such areas as education and vocational training, including tourism. She also wished to know whether the Directorate had achieved any specific results in the fields of interest to the Committee.

28. She would appreciate further information about the composition of civil society, and about the role of non-governmental organizations and the degree of coordination with the Directorate of Women's Affairs.

29. She would like to know whether the church had an influence on the development of women's rights, especially in matrimonial and family law, whether it took a position on such matters as abortion, teenage pregnancy and domestic violence, and whether it contributed to the advancement of women, or held them back.

Article 3

30. Ms. BERNARD asked whether the Equal Opportunity Act dealt only with discrimination against women in the workplace or was concerned with discrimination in general. She requested further information on the Divorce Act and asked whether it provided for orders of maintenance, child custody and the disposition of property acquired during the marriage.

31. Ms. OUEDRAOGO said that the report indicated that the Directorate of Women's Affairs was within the Prime Minister's office, but it was much more effective to have an autonomous minister for women's affairs. Moreover, a directorate only made proposals and did not have decision-making power. Since five women currently held senior posts in Antigua and Barbuda, an opportunity existed to accelerate reforms.

32. She asked how the Directorate of Women's Affairs was structured and what resources it had, and whether women's associations and non-governmental

organizations were involved in the Advisory Board. She also inquired whether the Advisory Board had any technical committees to deal with the multisectoral dimensions of the issues of the advancement of women.

33. Ms. FERRER requested further information about the objectives, functions and priorities of the Directorate of Women's Affairs, and whether it had the necessary staff and budget to carry out its tasks; and about the membership and functions of the Advisory Board, and the issues it considered.

34. It was not clear whether the National Action Plan For Women In Development was a plan of action of the Directorate of Women's Affairs or a Government plan of action to implement the Beijing Platform for Action.

35. She would welcome information on the membership and objectives of the Coordinating Council of Women, and about mechanisms for consultation between the Directorate of Women's Affairs and the Coordinating Council.

Article 4

36. Ms. GONZALEZ said that the supplement to the initial, second and third periodic reports indicated that the national five-year development plan included a component on women, but that the concerns of women had not been fully integrated into the overall plan. She asked whether that meant that there were no specific strategies or projects for women in the plan. She also asked for further information on the additional responsibilities of the national machinery as the lead agency to coordinate plans and programmes for the integration of gender into Government policies and programmes.

Article 5

37. Ms. FERRER asked whether the Government of Antigua and Barbuda was planning to introduce non-sexist education programmes in the school system. It was very significant that many women worked as teachers at all levels of education and some were directors of educational institutions. She asked whether any type of training in gender-awareness was provided to them; such training would offer the possibility of directly influencing changes in perceptions.

38. The report made no reference to the mass media, which could also have an enormous influence on changes in perceptions. Emphasis must be placed on the importance of education about the family and about the joint responsibility of men and women for household work and child rearing, since attitudes within the family contributed greatly to problems at the level of society. In that connection, the report referred to the limitations faced by women because of their domestic tasks as if those tasks were their sole responsibility. She requested further information on the family life education programmes referred to in the supplementary to the reports, and on any programmes that were being carried out at the community level through the Department of Women's Affairs or non-governmental organizations to encourage women to reflect on the issues arising under article 5 of the Convention.

39. Ms. CORTI said that only systematic educational efforts could change the attitudes that gave rise to the widespread violence against women in Antigua and

Barbuda, since the report indicated that men accepted such acts as sexual harassment, sexual abuse, battery and rape as normal behaviour. She asked whether the 24-hour domestic violence hotline had been set up and how it was to be organized and financed. In particular, she wondered whether it would be staffed by volunteers or specialists. She also wanted information on whether the Sexual Offences Act 1995 was already being implemented, on the number of cases to which it had been applied and on its degree of success in helping to solve the problems of women victims of violence.

40. She asked how the Government was using the mass media to help combat stereotyped images of women, how many women worked in the public or private media and how the Directorate of Women's Affairs was mobilizing them to change the portrayal of women in the media, especially on television. Lastly, given that many Governments specifically earmarked part of their development assistance for women's issues, she wondered whether Antigua and Barbuda had requested such assistance to help speed up the implementation of its policies for women.

41. Ms. GONZALEZ said that she supported the suggestions of Ms. Ferrer and Ms. Corti on the prevention of violence against women. Education was essential not only in that context, but also as a means of expanding women's role in politics by teaching girls to assume new roles in society and teaching boys to accept those roles. She asked for information on the incidence and nature of physical and psychological violence against children, especially girls, and wondered whether people in Antigua and Barbuda were conditioned from childhood to see violence as socially acceptable. Although the report pointed out that most women victims of violence were economically and psychologically dependent on the perpetrators, it also indicated that 58.5 per cent of the nation's households were headed by women. She wondered whether violence against women was also common in such households.

42. Ms. JAVATE DE DIOS asked for a more detailed description of the family life education programmes being carried out in Antigua and Barbuda, and specifically whether they addressed the issue of gender roles and expectations, and why so few men chose to participate in them. She applauded the programmes, legislation and sensitization campaigns being implemented to combat violence against women; however, research on such violence was needed to determine its root causes and consequences and to serve in the design of intervention programmes.

43. She asked for clarification of how calypso, as an art form, was currently used to perpetuate sexual stereotypes, and how the Government saw culture, and particularly calypso, as a vehicle for promoting positive change. Lastly, in view of the widespread portrayal of women as sex objects on the Internet, she asked whether that medium had been used to promote Antigua and Barbuda as a destination for sex tourism.

Article 6

44. Ms. BUSTELO GARCÍA DEL REAL requested information on the effect of the new legislation on prostitution (number of men arrested and penalized per year and whether prostitution had increased or decreased). She also asked whether any prostitution network in Antigua and Barbuda had been linked to international

networks of trafficking in persons. Lastly, she asked for information on the age and nationality of prostitutes and on whether they were entitled to benefit from public health services.

45. Ms. LIN Shangzhen said that Antigua and Barbuda's attempts to halt prostitution had been thwarted by the economy's reliance on tourism, which often gave rise to prostitution. The authorities must make sustained long-term efforts to stop the phenomenon, since it brought only physical and moral harm and degradation to women.

Article 7

46. Ms. BERNARD said that, in many Caribbean countries, women formed the backbone of the electorate but were nearly absent from legislative bodies; Antigua and Barbuda clearly followed that trend. She asked whether the Directorate of Women's Affairs had developed a programme to encourage women to assume decision-making roles not only in the public sector, but also in the private sector as managers, and in the judiciary.

47. Ms. CORTI asked whether the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House, both of whom were women, had been appointed to their posts, since the report indicated that no woman had ever been elected to Parliament. She also asked for details on the country's strategies and plans of action for achieving the election of women to public office. Women must be convinced that it was in their interest to vote for female candidates, who were more sensitive to the issues of concern to them. All possible assistance, including the mass media, must be enlisted to achieve that goal.

48. Ms. GONZALEZ asked why the Speaker of the House had been appointed instead of elected. She supported Ms. Corti's remarks on the need to encourage women to run for public office, since the report indicated that most women were currently unwilling to do so owing to their household responsibilities and their distorted perceptions of politics.

Article 8

49. Ms. GONZALEZ wished to know what posts were held by women who were posted abroad in embassies, consulates and international organizations, and by women in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs within Antigua and Barbuda.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.